When George Wallace Came to Town

BY
JOE ALLEN

Donald Trump's appeal to some suffering white workers shouldn't surprise us. George Wallace did the same thing four decades ago.

Throughout Donald Trump's presidential campaign, many leftists were confused that such a sizable number of white, blue-collar workers supported him. He won, in part, thanks to these votes, which edged him to victory in the key Rust Belt states.

The 2016 presidential campaign held plenty of surprises, but Trump's appeal to that section of the American working class didn't surprise me at all. I grew up in Stoughton, Massachusetts, a small town a little less than twenty miles south of Boston. Today, locals know it because it's home to New England's largest Ikea. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, Stoughton achieved notoriety for something very different: it became a battleground over low-income, racially integrated housing.

In that context, the notorious southern bigot George C. Wallace came hunting for votes and found a ready-made audience among blue-collar workers.

George Wallace's Roadshow

Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama became famous in 1963 when he declared that he stood for "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." He demonstrated this resolve by blocking the University of Alabama's doorway to stop the first black students from enrolling. In 1964, he decided to take his show on the road.

That year, Wallace tested the waters at three carefully selected primaries — Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland — where he thought he could find a sympathetic audience. He attacked integration and praised the police, clearly appealing to traditionally Democratic voters who opposed their party's civil rights measures.

In each, he impressively garnered at least a third of the vote; at the time, many believed that he had actually won the Maryland primary.

No one would call George Wallace a conventional politician. He was friends with Alabama Klan leader Robert Shelton and his United Klans of America. Alabama under his governorship saw some of worst violence of the civil rights era, including the Birmingham church bombing, which killed four young girls, and Viola Liuzzo's murder.

When Wallace spoke, he evoked this violence. His snarling demeanor alternated with a folksy charm, producing a certain kind of charisma that apparently appealed to bigots nationwide. His rallies encouraged violence against critics and sometimes ended in a brawl.

The bloody spring and summer of 1968 opened the door for Wallace's second campaign: President Lyndon Johnson withdrew from the race, and both Wallace's long-time nemesis Martin Luther King and the hated former Attorney General Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. He decided to run this time on the American Independent Party ticket, using "Stand Up for America" as his slogan.

He fine-tuned his speeches to appeal to Northern audiences, attacking "pointy-headed bureaucrats," "liberals," and "pinkos" who placed the burdens of civil rights and welfare programs on the working class's shoulders. The audience especially loved "Our lives are being taken over by bureaucrats, and most of them have beards!"

Wallace didn't have to dig too deep to find Northern soil rich in racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and plain old parochialism. These lower-middle-class and working-class voters yearned for someone like Wallace to express their anger at a party that they felt had abandoned them.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars in small campaign donations poured in from across the country, and Wallace bragged that they demonstrated his popular support. This, however, concealed the dirty facts:

he financed his campaign through Alabama's traditional, corrupt methods, and Texas billionaire Bunker Hunt provided a large share of Wallace's war chest.

He loved barnstorming across the North, meeting eager audiences everywhere he went. He usually chose to speak at European ethnic social clubs, American Legion halls, or Veterans of Foreign Wars posts where he gleefully whipped up the traditionally Democratic audience. Along the way, he attracted violent racists. James Earl Ray, King's assassin, worked briefly for his campaign in California.

Tom Turnipseed — Wallace's campaign manager who later became a famous South Carolina liberal — recalled one unnerving interaction with a supporter:

> I remember I was in a little town in south central Massachusetts called Webster. I went to the Polish American Club and the manager says . . . "When Governor Wallace is elected president," he said, "he's going to line up all these niggers and shoot them, isn't he?"

On July 11, 1968, Wallace arrived in Stoughton to collect signatures to get on the state ballot. Neither a local social club nor a veterans' group hosted him; he was allowed to rally at town hall, the seat of Stoughton's government.

Wallace's security team arrived first. A flatbed truck pulled up, and, according to *Stoughton Chronicle* reporter Dick Solito, "Several burly men piled out of an accompanying car and skillfully erected a three-sided, steel, bullet-proof lectern in the trailer." Others set up tables to sell campaign paraphernalia and ballot petitions.

A country–western band — Sam Smith and Travelers — entertained the crowd, which Solito estimated at between five and six hundred people. A handful of protesters — the reporter thought they were local college students — showed up, too. Soon Wallace emerged from his car to the band's cry: "Ladies and gentlemen, the next president of the United States, George C. Wallace."

The band struck up "Dixie." Acting town manager Manuel J. Rodrigues welcomed the candidate, an extraordinary gesture considering that most Northern government officials avoided Wallace like the plague.

He launched into a speech he'd honed during the previous six months on the campaign trail. "I have never in my life made a statement that reflected on anybody because of his race, color, creed, or national origin." He pledged to restore law and order and lashed out at Washington officials: "When

I'm president I'll call back all the bureaucrats, throw all of their briefcases into the Potomac River, and make them find jobs in private industry."

He also exhorted the crowd, "Stand with the police, take the handcuffs off them. Then you will see law and order." Solito recorded that the audience "met [this] with applause." Wallace finished his speech, and many lined up to shake his hand. He soon left for another stop on his campaign roadshow.

Why Stoughton?

Barry Goldwater, Arizona senator and 1964 Republican candidate for president, once chided Republican party activists to stop wasting time chasing votes from the party's dwindling African-American base. "Go hunting where the ducks are," he advised.

For Goldwater, that meant focusing on the former Confederacy and its white residents, who tended to oppose the Civil Rights Movement. He won five: Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina, along with his home state of Arizona.

Wallace planned to build on Goldwater's base, but, if he hoped to win the presidency, he needed to take a large number of votes in the North and West as well. His campaign targeted places like Stoughton, and the local press wasn't terribly surprised. Within a few hours of the rally, the *Stoughton Chronicle* published a scathing editorial:

> Governor Wallace is an astute politician who is not apt to waste either time or motion. Underneath its suburban lid, Stoughton is a hotbed of reactionary feeling. This is nothing new. It dates back to the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and '30s. The gentleman from Alabama can expect to do quite well in Stoughton. If you're still wondering why, stop and take a long hard look at Stoughton. It might do some good.

This editorial came in the context of a major civil rights campaign in the Boston area. Activists were trying to pry open the burgeoning suburbs to black residents, and Stoughton became one of the first towns they approached about building a low-income, racially integrated housing project.

Their proposed development, called Presidential Courts, would provide one hundred and forty units for low- and moderate-income families. Designed by pioneer African-American architect Donald Stull, the project would create the "best possible social environment through creative site planning and design."

When housing advocate Edward Walsh officially unveiled the plans in January 1967, the *Chronicle* reported that they

> called for two-story town houses clustered around landscaped courtyards . . . a community center with day care facilities, a nursery school, hobby and meeting rooms for the elderly, and play areas for tots and older children.

Walsh made it clear to the town government "that the important thing about our project is that it is not a tax-supported nor a charity program." The Interfaith Housing Council (IHC), a nonprofit ecumenical advocacy group founded in 1965, would borrow the capital necessary to build the project, and the federal government would obtain the necessary loans.

He emphasized that the development filled "a very real need to create housing for families that can afford only modest amounts for rentals." He perfectly described my family's situation, along with many other Stoughton residents.

A small number of the housing units would be made available to African-American families, more likely than not living in Boston. At the time, only one hundred black families lived in Stoughton — less than 1 percent of the town's population.

The *Chronicle*'s staff, shaken by Martin Luther King's assassination, begged Stoughton's residents to approve the proposal:

> Examples of the subtle racism that distorts the face of our land and prevents all from being truly free men are only too easy to find in our town. The one which came to mind most vividly this weekend was early opposition many visitors to the office voiced to the Interfaith Housing Corporation's Presidential Courts housing plan.

The plea fell on deaf ears. Stoughton's planning board sat on the proposal for over a year while opposition gathered steam. In early February 1968, the board announced its unanimous decision to

reject the proposal, claiming that the IHC failed to make a convincing case to build Presidential Courts.

This was all theater; everyone knew what was really going on. In an angry editorial, the *Chronicle* wrote:

> This [Presidential Courts] plan, we were told, to "bring niggers from Roxbury" [Boston's largest Black neighborhood] into Stoughton. And, indeed this was repeated often enough to represent a fairly widely held view. Once this piece of distorted thinking had been disseminated, it went underground and opposition to the project took other forms. More reasonable on the surface, many of these arguments cloaked the inability of some to examine their prejudices.

The town government had to make the final decision. They delayed for another two months. A packed town meeting dominated by opponents to Presidential Courts drowned out the few who supported the project. The Board of Selectman didn't even allow a debate on the housing project before they voted to reject the proposal.

Real Need

The opposition to Presidential Courts sharply contrasted the town's desperate need for affordable housing. Many blue- and white-collar residents worked in nonunion workplaces or, like my father, at the Plymouth Rubber Company, which had a weak local affiliated with the United Rubber Workers (URW). They didn't make a lot of money.

Stoughton's single-family homes sold for between $15,000 and $20,000. In 1967, Walsh estimated that nearly 43 percent of residents had incomes below $6,000. "It is extremely difficult for a family making only $6,000 to meet such payments, amounting to one-third of their income," he said.

Younger families in particular felt the lack of affordable housing. Like other mothers, mine worried about our housing situation. My parents, three sisters, uncle — who had returned from his last tour of duty in the Vietnam War — and I all crammed into a two-bedroom apartment. In her few spare moments, my mother searched for a better housing situation.

Eventually, the opposition to Presidential Courts was overcome. The *Boston Globe*'s Deckle McLean summed up what happened in his 1971 article "Cracking the Barrier":

> Stoughton had rejected the project, but it needed expansion of its water system. HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] was willing to use the big stick: no project, no water. Stoughton took the development and received its water.

Construction permits for Presidential Courts were issued in 1969 and, in December 1970, families started moving into the new townhouses. We joined that first generation of residents.

Low-income families in other nearby suburbs were not so lucky. Similar housing projects were voted down in Canton and Randolph, Massachusetts.

"We're just trying to build houses, not expose anybody's racism. But you can get five hundred bigots in two or three hours; and when you get them, everything stops. Boards are afraid to vote. It takes two or three years to get the reasonable people out," Roland S. Larsen, director of the IHC, told Deckle McLean.

While Presidential Courts was still under construction, some of Stoughton's more cowardly racists vandalized the townhouses: "Uncle Tom Cabins" and "Ghetto Area." "But as it turns out," McLean reported, "only about fourteen families are black and many of these are not from the city at all. Most of the people in Presidential Courts are from Stoughton and most of them are white."

What We Stand to Lose

When the November 1968 election came, Stoughton's voters had to choose between Senator Hubert Humphrey for the Democrats, Richard Nixon for the Republicans, and Governor George Wallace. Out of slightly more than eight thousand votes, Humphrey won handily. Only 356 went to Wallace, a paltry sum considering the effort he put into his Massachusetts campaign.

Yet I can attest to Wallace's support. My father voted for him.

During that late summer and early autumn, Wallace caused a panic among the AFL-CIO and the UAW leadership, who traditionally supported the Democratic presidential candidates. Walter Reuther had to create a Wallace desk at Solidarity House to coordinate activities with the Humphrey campaign and curb the support the Southern governor enjoyed among UAW's rank and file.

The AFL-CIO spent $1 million that year — the equivalent of $8 million today — to suppress the Wallace vote throughout its membership.

Wallace frightened the Democrats even more in 1972 when he returned to the Democratic primaries. The *New York Times* reported, "He appeared to have wider support this year than in 1968, when he ran as a third-party candidate of the American Independent party." His campaign slogan this time around was "Send them a message." Clearly, he wanted to indict the party's liberal establishment.

Despite Arthur Bremer's assassination attempt in Laurel, Maryland, on May 15, 1972, Wallace won the Michigan and Maryland primaries. At the time, the AFL-CIO had 350,000 members in Michigan, while independent unions like the Teamsters and the UAW had, respectively, 90,000 and 600,000 active and retired members throughout the state. Wallace won in a landslide.

Labor leaders endorsed Wallace's rivals, Senators George McGovern, Edmund Muskie, and Hubert Humphrey. But voters were moved more by one of the major issues in the Democratic primaries — busing to desegregate schools — than by union bureaucrats. Wallace rode the wave of white opposition to victory, and the big industrial unions proved to be a weak barrier to his racism.

Why did Wallace do so well in 1968 and 1972 among blue-collar voters and union members?

Jack Newfield, a veteran *Village Voice* journalist and one-time socialist, argued that Wallace was the only candidate who stood for something. He wrote, "Liberal hypocrisy created a lot of Wallace votes in 1968. I cannot recall either Johnson in 1964 or Humphrey in 1968 campaigning on any positive or exciting ideas that might excite the almost-poor workers, whose votes they took for granted."

New Republic columnist Richard Strout recognized the specter of fascism. Sitting in the upper balcony of a sold-out Madison Square Garden as Wallace whipped up the crowd, he wrote "There is menace in the blood shout of the crowds. You feel you have known this somewhere; never again will you read about Berlin in the thirties without remembering this wild confrontation here."

Both Newfield and Strout had some insight into the Wallace phenomenon but ultimately couldn't explain it. Wallace, a clever bigot, pioneered a new form of racist populism. He successfully recast old bigotries, racializing blue-collar workers' economic and social anxieties while abandoning the overt

racism of the old Dixiecrats. Dan T. Carter closed his biography of Wallace by declaring that “Wallace was the most influential loser in twentieth-century American politics.”

Wallace’s unrelenting attacks on the Civil Rights Movement and the welfare state gave cover to undermine the very programs that many white working-class people desperately need, from Medicare and Medicaid to affordable housing.

In the wake of Donald Trump’s victory, the groundwork for which Wallace’s three national campaigns laid, we must try to prevent the new disasters the president-elect will bring to all workers. Rather than crow when Trump supporters lose their health care, we have to offer them an analysis of economic and social instability that can unite them across class lines and against clever bigots like Wallace and Trump.

CONTRIBUTORS

Joe Allen's latest book is *The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service*.

FILED UNDER

United States

Party Politics / Race / History

Donald Trump / George Wallace / Segregation / Barry Goldwater